
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 13-12

Washington Railway and Electric Company Garage

Square 2877, Lot 933
2112 Georgia Avenue NW

Meeting Date: April 25, 2013
Applicant: D.C. Preservation League
Affected ANC: 1B
Staff Reviewer: Tim Dennee

After careful consideration, the Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Washington Railway and Electric Company Garage, 2112 Georgia Avenue NW, a historic landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. The staff further recommends that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places with a recommendation for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance of 1930 to 1958, the period of time from the building's construction until the cessation of use of the property to house and service buses.

The property meets District of Columbia Criterion B ("History") and National Register Criterion A for being associated with "institutions... or patterns of growth and change that contributed significantly to the heritage, culture or development of the District of Columbia or the nation." It also meets District of Columbia Criterion D and National Register Criterion C for "embody[ing] the distinguishing characteristics of architectural styles, building types, or methods of construction... significant to the appearance and development of the District of Columbia or the nation." The property meets the eligibility criteria for the resource subtype "bus garages" as set forth in the multiple-property document *Streetcar and Bus Resources of Washington, D.C., 1862-1962* adopted by the Board and by the National Register of Historic Places in 2000 (and amended in 2005).

Background

What came to be known as the Capital Transit Company's Central Bus Garage was constructed in 1930 to house and maintain the buses of the Washington Railway and Electric Company (WRECO), formerly known as the Washington Traction and Electric Company. As its name suggests, WRECO originated as a streetcar company, although its surplus electric generation capacity was spun off into a subsidiary today known as PEPCO.

Most streetcar companies formed to operate a single, individually chartered line. But economies of scale and the need for connecting lines rapidly led to consolidations. Mergers, buyouts and increasing regulation at the turn of the twentieth century reduced the street railways to two rival companies, WRECO and the Capital Traction Company. But while each was competing for

patronage, the fact that they possessed fixed lines meant that they were in direct competition with each other only to the degree that their routes neared each other enough to provide an alternative.

Newer routes, built largely to stimulate suburban development and then benefit from the resultant ridership, were problematic in that the service was infrequent and the cars overcrowded. The apogee of the extent of Washington's streetcar system coincided with the rise of the automobile, and the Public Utilities Commission was soon granting permission to replace the less populated routes, and to connect them, with buses.

The first all-bus line was established by the Metropolitan Coach Company in 1913, but it failed within two years. The well-capitalized Washington Rapid Transit Company opened several routes from 1921 on, and its success attracted more entrants into the field, whose buses initially served as feeders to the streetcar system. Thus, the streetcar companies themselves became primary operators of buses. Both streetcars and buses saw increased competition from private cars, taxis and jitneys, depressing transit ridership.

The popularity of streetcars began to decline, because of the level of service, the availability of competing modes of travel, and the fact that they were increasingly seen as obstructive to traffic and as less safe and accessible than buses, which could be boarded from the curb. Buses offered a maneuverability and a flexibility of routes that seemed to promise better service and more efficient movement along roadways. But this flexibility meant more direct competition, at least to the extent permitted by the Public Utilities Commission.

Of course, bus fleets required parking, preferably out of the weather, and service facilities. The two combined streetcar/bus companies, WRECO and Washington Rapid Transit soon sought large garages. Although other companies had presumably repurposed existing warehouses and garages, WRECO's Georgia Avenue bus garage is the first known purpose-built garage for a transit fleet.¹

The WRECO garage was constructed in 1930. In many ways, its function called for a structure similar to the streetcar barns that had preceded it. But it reflected its time and its particular use in its construction methods and architectural expression. The use of masonry veneer had become ubiquitous in the 1920s, and the shift from rail-borne rolling stock to buses required a more open and flexible interior plan, which necessitated longer roof trusses than previously.

In 1930, the world had already sunk into the Great Depression, and the regulation of fares further limited the amount a bus company could expend on the decoration of something as utilitarian as a garage. But such facilities did reflect on a company's public image, and there was still a sense that an architect and his patron owed something to the civic and urbanistic conversation in designing a prominent building. In approaching WRECO's garage, the accomplished, prolific and versatile local architect Arthur B. Heaton undertook to make visually interesting what was at base a simple box. He succeeded by varying both the roofline and the major wall planes, with muscular piers and stepped parapets, consistent with the prevailing Art Deco style. To do away with the excess of the Victorian era was consistent with the spirit of the times, as well as an

¹ Consider that the smaller and more modestly detailed garage built by J. Edward Chapman—which the Board looked at last month—was repurposed for the storage of inter-city buses only in 1933.

economic necessity. Yet Heaton still employed his humble principal material, brick, in a decorative manner, to achieve greater texture and relieve long expanses of wall. Red, yellow, greenish and blue-black, the bricks are laid in common bond and a basket weave. Heaton would return to the use of this tapestry brick in his later Western Bus Garage for the Capital Transit Company.

It soon became evident that, whatever the drawbacks of a monopoly, public transit appeared to have become a natural monopoly, that is, one company could serve the entire city, benefitting from scale economies, and entry by additional large competitors would be very difficult. WRECO found itself battered by the depression and the limits on its fares, and it was slowly losing ground to Washington Rapid Transit. In 1933, an immense consolidation of local transportation occurred with the establishment of Capital Transit Company and its absorption of both WRECO and Washington Rapid Transit, plus all the remaining streetcar lines. WRECO's Georgia Avenue garage became Capital Transit's Central Garage and remained in that use until 1958, a point when D.C. bus transit had nearly replaced all streetcars.

Evaluation

The Washington Railway and Electric Company or Central Garage is important for being the first purpose-built transit bus garage, an always scarce industrial building type and now dwindling in number. It clearly served as the prototype for the Western Bus Garage, the first such building erected by Capital Transit, an apparent attempt at a unified look to the facilities of the conglomerate. The garage may be the last building associated with WRECO, a major transit company and the parent company of PEPCO.

The Multiple Property Document *Streetcar and Bus Resources of Washington, D.C., 1862-1962* states that "the bus garage is a significant property type for its role in the continuing evolution of public transportation in Washington, D.C."

Bus garages are eligible for listing in the National Register under Criteria A and C. In order to be eligible... [they] must retain integrity of setting, location, design, workmanship, and association. The resource should display original massing and elements that denote the building's use... [such as] large door openings to accommodate buses and character-defining industrial steel windows. The buildings have three-part elevations with a central pavilion and end wings. The central pavilion is equipped with large bus doors and the end wings with industrial window sash lighting the interior of the repair shops.

The WRECO Bus Garage displays the massing and elements associated with its original use, as well as possessing integrity of its original design, setting, and workmanship. There has been some alteration of window and door openings by masonry infill, etc.

Together with the Bond Bread Factory, the Washington Railway and Electric Company Garage has long been a visual landmark on Georgia Avenue; they are two of the few remaining large industrial buildings that catered to local needs. Howard University's 2011 campus plan called out the structures as two of the more important buildings forming the neighborhood context. And the recommendations of the "placemaking" section of the Office of Planning's 2004 *DUKE*:

Development Framework for a Cultural Destination District Within Washington, DC's Greater Shaw U Street included the preservation of “existing Howard University property (all, or some façade elements) at the northwest corner of V Street and Georgia Avenue [and to] Incorporate [it] into Howard Town Center for possible uses as a grocery store and other retail uses.”